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SUBJECT: Preparations for August 8 ARMM elections

REF: A. MANILA 724

1B. MANILA 646

1C. 04 MANILA 6032

1D. 04 MANILA 4416

11. (SBU) Summary: Over 1.1 million people are registered for the August 8 election in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Election officials hope for the first time to use automated counting machines, originally purchased for the May 2004 nationwide elections but subsequently impounded by order of the Supreme Court due to allegations of corruption. The USG-funded Consortium for Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) is working to help the GRP and civil society groups unite their efforts in the most effective manner. Electoral reform advocates want the ARMM election to demonstrate improvements in the aftermath of the controversial 2004 elections. End Summary.

COMELEC Preparations

12. (U) According to Commission on Elections (COMELEC) officials, approximately 30,000 people registered during the recent registration drive (which closed on March 15) for the August 8 ARMM elections for governor, a vice-governor, and members of the regional legislative council based in Cotabato City. COMELEC will add these new registrants to the current validated list, which contains some 1.1 million voters. COMELEC officials noted that the ARMM -- consisting of the five provinces of Sulu, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, Maguindanao, and Lanao del Sur -- had nearly 2.5 million inhabitants during the last census in 2000, of whom over 90 percent were Muslim and only 68 percent were literate. COMELEC officials expressed satisfaction that over 85 percent of the total voting age population had now registered.

13. (SBU) COMELEC is focusing on a voter education drive. Milagros Desamitos, COMELEC's Director of Voter Education for the ARMM, told poloff that his office is training a multi-sectoral group -- the Electoral Reform Association (ERA) -- in how to disseminate voter information and encourage wider civic participation in the coming election. ERA membership includes the editor of the leading Tawi-Tawi newspaper, several professors from Mindanao State University, other local NGOs, and faith-based community groups from both Muslim and Christian areas. Desamitos reported that COMELEC provincial office directors from Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Maguindanao were actively encouraging local government officials to join in ERA's efforts. Major voter education challenges include obtaining valuable media airtime on local radio and television, as well as providing information in the native dialects of the ARMM provinces. Desamitos reported that COMELEC was coordinating with the Office of Muslim Affairs (OMA), under the Office of the President, and had already obtained translators to assist with Tausug, Yakan, Maranaw, and Maguin -- the main dialects in the ARMM other than Visayan dialects, which are common throughout Mindanao.

14. (SBU) COMELEC is also trying to obtain automated counting machines to use in the election. COMELEC Commissioners recently met with Supreme Court Chief Justice Hilario Davide, who indicated that the Court might be favorably inclined to allowing the limited use of a number of the currently embargoed counting machines this August. (Note: The machines, originally intended for the May 2004 national elections, were impounded when the Supreme Court ruled in early 2004 that the COMELEC contract to purchase them was illegal and probably corrupt. End note) Commissioners noted that the Solicitor General had filed comments with the Court indicating his approval of COMELEC's petition to use several hundred of the machines in the election. COMELEC officials predicted that the use of machines would vastly improve the counting process and thus speed up reporting of the final poll results.

Civil Society Efforts

15. (SBU) In addition to the COMELEC-driven ERA effort, the Consortium on Electoral Reforms (CER), a coalition of NGOs focused on advancing electoral reforms, is also planning to encourage active citizen participation in the August 8 election. CER plans to hold a summit of NGO, GRP, and business (primarily media) representatives in May or June 2005 in Cotabato City in order to train participants as electoral observers and voter assistance volunteers.

According to both COMELEC's Desamitos and CER's Chairman Ramon Casiple, the national Catholic group Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), which is also a CER member, is trying to mount an ARMM-focused educational campaign but has encountered some resistance on the ground in the ARMM from Muslim groups. PPCRV's large staff of mostly young volunteers played a major stabilizing role as domestic observers and by manning thousands of voter assistance booths at the precinct level during the May 2004 elections. PPCRV's effort in the ARMM will continue, but CER's Casiple said that other NGOs in CER were also reaching out to the networks of both the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Role of CEPSS

16. (U) The USG-funded Consortium for Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) is working to help the GRP and civil society groups unite their efforts in the most effective manner. As part of CEPPS, a representative of the U.S.-based International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) is now in the Philippines working on electoral reform with the major players. An important near-term priority for the IFES representative is arranging an information technology expert's review of COMELEC's IT strategy. In addition, the IFES representative is working to provide phased funding and material preparation assistance for CER's voter education and information drive. IFES also plans to bring in a campaign finance expert to assist Philippine congressional electoral reform committee members regarding possible legislation in this area.

17. (U) Beyond providing technical assistance to both COMELEC and CER, the CEPPS effort is targeting voter education opportunities, in which it can encourage the GRP and civil society to leverage each other's materials and training plans. CEPPS has arranged meetings with COMELEC, CER, and other interested organizations, including the UNDP and Germany's Konrad Adenauer Institute, in order to foster and sustain lasting public-private partnerships of experts in the field. CEPPS' aim is for these linkages to support real reform in time for the ARMM election, as well as to lay a sustainable foundation for reform building toward the mid-term 2007 national elections.

Comment

18. (SBU) Electoral reform advocates want the ARMM election to demonstrate improvements in the electoral system in the aftermath of the controversial May 2004 elections. So far, COMELEC and civil society efforts seem to be effectively addressing some of the chronic problems that have afflicted Philippine elections, including patchy voter registration lists, antiquated election counting procedures, and inadequate public information campaigns. Campaign-related violence and vote buying, however, likely will nonetheless plague these elections, despite procedural and technological improvements. The CEPPS project underscores strong USG support for the overall reform effort.

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